

What's the Current Status of Brucellosis in Montana?

The department's highest current priority is to get solid, science-based answers to your – and our – questions about the status of brucellosis in Montana. Working closely with USDA, we are tracing back to identify all the cattle that have ever come in contact with the few that have tested positive for brucellosis. This very detailed and exacting process, and the testing it involves, takes time. At the moment, we still have *no reason whatsoever* to believe that the problem extends beyond a few cattle in the herd at Bridger – which, in turn, all originated in a herd near Emigrant. Again, it will take time to confirm the facts, but so far it seems that the disease remains closely confined to these cattle which are co-managed by members of the same family and that may actually constitute a single herd under federal definitions.

When Will We Know?

We are hopeful that by the end of this week, if not sooner, we may have confirmed whether any of the cattle in Emigrant have tested positive for brucellosis. The testing process is itself quite complicated, however – and it is possible that the initial round of testing won't be conclusive and that it will instead indicate the need for a different, more rigorous type of testing.

What Will Happen If There Are More Positive Test Results?

It depends on whether the USDA decides to regard the herd in Emigrant, from which all the positive-tested cattle in Bridger originated, as a separate herd even though all the cattle involved are managed by the same family. If the federal government decides to regard these as two separate herds because portions of the herd are in two different locations, the likelihood is that Montana may temporarily lose its brucellosis-free status.

What Will Loss of Brucellosis-Free Status Mean?

Losing our brucellosis-free status will mean that no Montana cattle can be shipped out of state without first being tested – with those tests producing a clear, negative (no disease) result. This testing requirement will cause a serious economic set-back to the livestock industry in Montana, potentially costing the state's producers millions of dollars each year in spending that otherwise wouldn't have been necessary. It is an understatement to say that it is seriously regrettable that Yellowstone Park has failed to adequately contain the brucellosis abortus organism carried by the Park's bison and elk populations.

What Happens to Affected Herds?

Herds that may be affected are immediately quarantined until/unless testing confirms no brucellosis. But if tests are positive and confirm that brucellosis is present, then USDA requires that all members of the affected herds be destroyed. During an initial investigation, while a state's brucellosis-free status remains in force, the USDA indemnifies ranchers from the costs of testing and of herd loss, if any. But once a state loses its brucellosis-free status, if it does, ranchers themselves must bear these costs unless other funding mechanisms are developed at the state level.

How Long Can an Investigation Take?

Federal rules require that all animals known to have come in contact with a brucellosis-positive animal must be tested within 60 days of the first discovery of a brucellosis problem. In Montana's current situation – with the first positive test result having been confirmed on May 18, 2007, this means that all identified contact herds must complete the testing process by July 17, 2007.

To the General Public

The situation has no likely effect on the general public apart from its negative potential effect on the economics of the state's livestock industry and thus the state's economy as a whole.